Monuments mean much to Belgians

Site at Champion, one abroad revive memories

By Lois Kerin
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On both sides of the Atlantic, a monument has been erected in memory of the Belgian immigrants who settled in Wisconsin.

One monument is in Grez-Doiceau, the point of departure for Belgians in 1853.

The other is in Champion, where pioneers staked their claim in the wilderness they called "Aux Premier Belges" — the first Belgians.

The community, which later became known as Robinsonville and then Champion, is the largest Walloon Belgian settlement in the United States.

There is only one other Belgian monument in the United States. Erected in 1924 at Battery Park in New York City, it comemmorates the landing of Walloon families in New Amsterdam in 1624.

Harry Chaudoir, president of the Peninsula Belgian-American Club, said, "The monument came to Champion in three pieces. Jerry Monfils of Brussels constructed the red brick base and housing." Wording on the monument, a 500-pound slab of Gobertange marble, is inscribed in French and English.

The monument was dedicated on July 6, 1985.

The Rev. Jean Ducat and 41 of his countrymen participated in the dedication rites, and celebrated the 10th anniversary of their exchange visits with members of the Peninsula Belgian-American Club.

Chaudoir said there was some discussion before the monument was placed in Champion. "Brussels and Namur wanted it in their area," he said.

"The Flemish Belgians settled in Tonet," Chaudoir said. "When people wanted to 'Go Flemish,' they went to Tonet," he said.

Like many of the Belgian families, Chaudoir has traced his roots. He dates his family from 1640.

"They were industrial people," he said. He learned that a Monfils was abandoned on a doorstep, the name meaning "My son." Children born out of wedlock were given new names.

Mary Ann Defnet, co-author of *From Grez-Doiceau to Wisconsin* tells the story of the Belgian immigration to Wisconsin.

"The United States government had a lot of land in the 1800s which was available for settlement," she wrote. Many people of German and Irish descent had arrived before 1850 and settled principally in the southern part of the state.

"In order to populate the rest of the countryside, the government sent advertisements to Europe which told of this land of opportunity," she said. "To the people of Belgium, who rarely owned their own land and had trouble providing for their large families, this sounded like a dream come true," she said.

Defnet's research shows that, in 1853, under the leadership of Francois Petiniot, a group of 84 people from the village of Grez-Doiceau and environs left their homeland for the new world. They sailed on the "Quinnebaug" and made friends with Dutch passengers on the ship, deciding to go with them.

They arrived in New York harbor July 6, 1853, and from there made their way through the waterways to the city of Sheboygan.

History shows the Belgians realized that this settlement of Dutch and German-speaking people was not for them. A visitor to the area told them that there were French-speaking people in Green Bay. From Green Bay the Belgians went to Kaukauna to prospect for land.

While the men were gone, one of the children in the group had died. A Belgian missionary priest, the Rev. Edward Daems, was visiting the church where the funeral was held and convinced the Belgians to settle near his parish in Bay Settlement.

Defnet writes, "The weary immigrants were happy to know that they could find land near a priest who spoke their language." That's when they staked their claim in the wilderness now known as Champion.

Land had to be cleared and shelters built; the winters were cold, much colder than in their homeland.

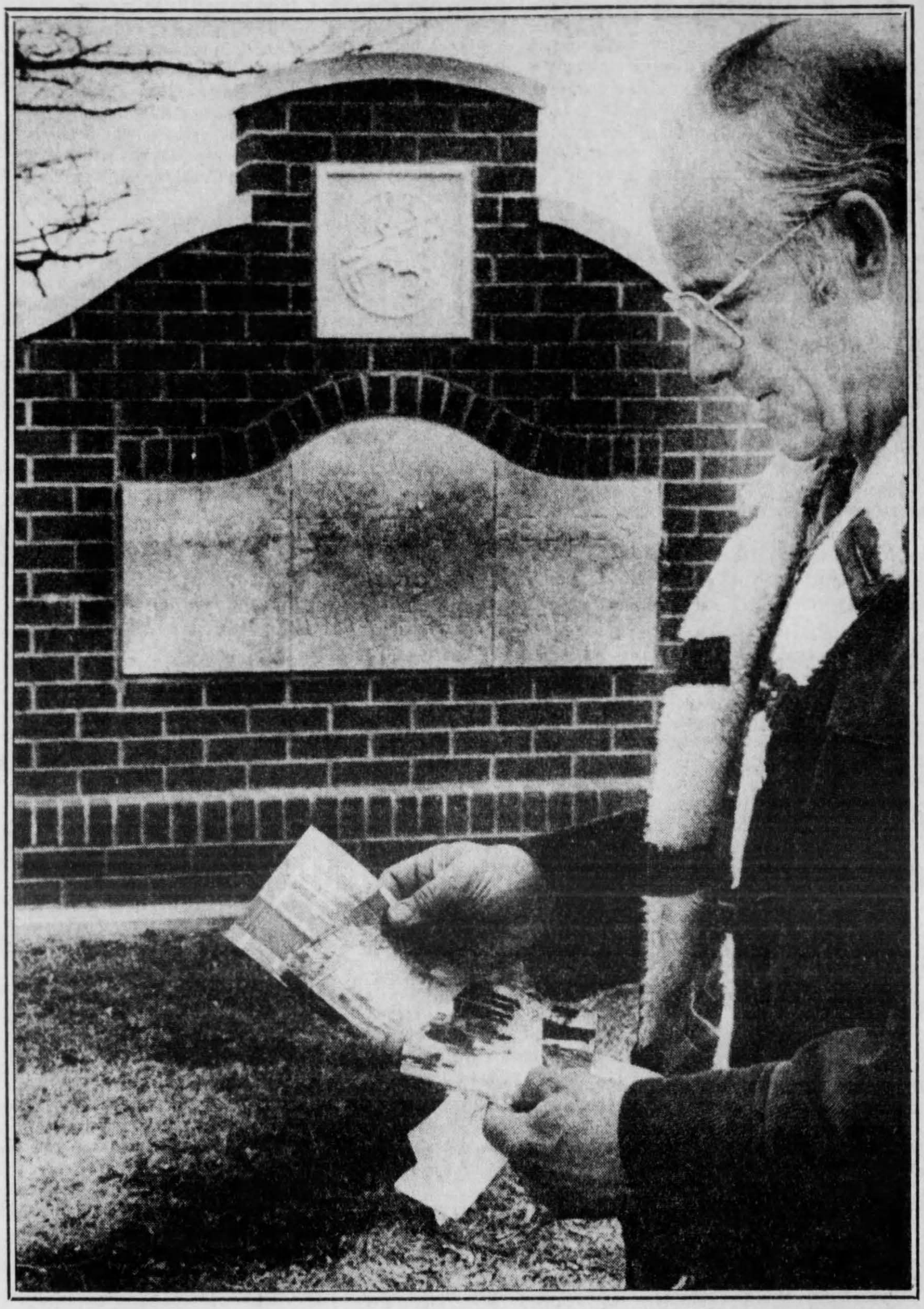
"The men and women were assisted many times by the friendly Indians of the area, who showed them how to trap wild animals for food, and how to tap the maple trees for syrup," Defnet wrote.

Two tragedies struck the growing community. One was the spread of Asiatic cholera, which claimed many lives. The other was the Peshtigo fire of 1871. Strong winds carried sparks across the bay, setting the countryside afire. Lives and possessions were lost.

The fire brought change to the community. Some residents moved to Green Bay, others to Minnesota and North Dakota to establish themselves.

But the community lives on. Some of its families still speak the Walloon language. The kermiss is still a post-harvest celebration.

The momument recognizes the Belgians, both Walloon and Flemish, who have made important contributions to the area.



Press-Gazette photo by Ken Behrend

Remembering: Harry Chaudoir, president of the Peninsula Belgian-American Club, stands near a monument erected in Champion to honor Belgian immigrants who settled in Wisconsin. Photographs he's holding show that a monument erected in Belgium at the immigrants' point of departure is very similar.